The Lady or the Tiger?

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK STOCKTON

Frank Stockton was born into a large family; his mother, Emily Hepsibeth Drean Stockton, was a school administrator, and his father, William Stockton, was a Methodist minister. Although his father discouraged Frank's literary ambitions, he nonetheless proved himself a talent at a young age. While a student at Central High School in Philadelphia, he wrote a story that was selected as the top entry in a contest, culminating in publication in the *Boys' and Girls' Journal*. In 1852, Frank began working as a wood engraver despite his father's suggestion that he go into medicine; he was also publishing short stories throughout the 1850s, in literary magazines such as the *American Courier* and the *Southern Literary Magazine*. In 1860, he married Mary Ann Edwards Tuttle, and the couple moved to Nutley, New Jersey, together. As demand for wood engraving decreased, Frank also began writing professionally for newspapers in Philadelphia. It was in 1867, however, that his literary life really took off: in this year he published "Ting-a-Ling," his first story to make a splash, and was consequently offered a prominent position as assistant editor and chief contributor with the children's section of the magazine *Hearth and Home*. Frank's artistic vision would only continue to develop, resulting in 1879 in the publication of *Rudder Grange*—a collection of short stories and Stockton's first hit with the public—and in 1882 the publication of "The Lady or the Tiger?," Stockton's most famous story. In 1902, at the height of his powers and fame as one of the greatest humorists and children's authors of his age, Stockton died of cerebral hemorrhage. He is buried in his native Philadelphia

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the children's literature Stockton composed is for the most part devoid of any explicit historical references, the novels he composed for adults like *The Great War Syndicate* (1889) and *The Great Stone of Sardis* (1898) are explicitly preoccupied with the burgeoning role of technology in human affairs. One reason that Stockton was so drawn to technology, and especially to the question of how more sophisticated technology would affect modern warfare, is that he lived during the American Civil War, where the relative crudeness of the weaponry led to agonizing deaths and crippling wounds. Stockton hoped that the technologies of the twentieth century, in contrast, would be so powerful as to discourage warfare altogether.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Lady or the Tiger?" is a fairy tale set in an exotic, vaguely Oriental kingdom, and as such gestures back to what is perhaps the most influential collection of such tales ever to be published in English, the *One Thousand and One Nights*, originally compiled in Arabic and later translated into English by Edward Lane (1840, 1859), John Payne (1882), and Richard Burton (1885), among others. However, while many English translations of the *One Thousand and One Nights* emphasize the stories' morals so as to make them more instructive for children readers (with the glaring exception of Burton's, which instead plays up sexual content), Stockton breaks with this moralizing tradition in "The Lady or the Tiger?" He instead creates an ambiguous ending that does not tell his reader what to think, but that invites the reader to think for him- or herself. Compare this strategy with those deployed by Lewis Carroll, who likewise leaves his children's books, like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), morally open-ended. However, while Carroll is an elaborate inventor of bizarre characters like the hookah-smoking Caterpillar and Cheshire Cat, along with mind-bending logical puzzles, Stockton's stories tend to be less interested in the fantastic and more interested in human motivation and foibles, told in a correspondingly simple, conversational prose.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Lady or the Tiger?"
- **When Published:** 1882
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Short story; fairy tale; children's literature
- **Setting:** An unnamed semi-barbaric kingdom, especially the king's public arena located within the kingdom
- **Climax:** The princess instructs the young man to open the door on the right in the arena, and he does so—but does the lady or the tiger greet him?
- **Antagonist:** The king's semi-barbaric and unjust administration of justice by chance as manifested in the public arena; the deviousness of human passion and jealousy
- **Point of View:** Mostly third person limited, with an essay on the princess's decision toward the story's end that includes the first person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Famous Admirer. The Englishman Robert Browning, perhaps the greatest of all the Victorian poets, admired Stockton's fairy tale. He claimed to have "had no hesitation in supposing that such a princess under such circumstances would direct her lover to the tiger's door." Such a claim, of course, probably tells us more about Browning than Stockton's princess.

Sequel. Stockton composed a sequel to "The Lady or the Tiger?" entitled "The Discourager of Hesitancy," in which a monarch and his companions travel to the semi-barbaric kingdom of the earlier story to ask whether the young man opened the door to find the lady or the tiger. In turn, "a high officer" presents them with yet another tale that ends with yet another dilemma, promising to answer the question of the lady or the tiger only if the monarch and his companions can decide the solution to this second dilemma. "At the latest accounts," the narrator reports at the end of the sequel, "the five strangers had not yet decided."

PLOT SUMMARY

There was once a "semi-barbaric" king, a man of exuberant imagination who had a tyrannical grip on his kingdom. From distant Latin neighbors, this king had borrowed the idea of building a grand **public arena**, but the purpose of this arena was all the king's own: he would hold trials there in accordance with a barbaric notion of poetic justice, where the accused would be forced to open one of two doors inside of the arena itself guided by nothing more than "impartial and incorruptible chance." One door led to a reward—a suitable lady whom the accused would be required to marry whether he liked it or not. The other led to punishment—a ferocious and tiger which would invariably kill the accused. No one could accuse this justice system of unfairness, because the accused himself chose which door to open; and the trials never failed to please and entertain the audience gathered for the occasion.

Now, the king had a daughter, the princess, as passionate and imperious as her father himself. She and a courtier, the young man, had fallen in love, despite the fact that the courtier was of a lower social station than the princess. Their affair was a happy one—at least until the king found out about it. He ordered that the young man be imprisoned, and condemned him to trial by arena for aspiring to one so far above him. It didn't matter to the king whether the young man opened the door to the lady or the tiger, for in either case he would be disposed of (through marriage or death), and the king would enjoy the trial regardless.

The day of the young man's trial came. He was released into the arena and confronted with the two fateful doors. However, his eyes met the princess's, who sat watching him, and because they were in love he discerned at once that his lover had found out which door held which fate, as he expected she would. Indeed, the princess had used gold and willpower to gain access to this secret as none before her had done, not even the king. And, in this knowledge, the princess directed the young man to the door on the right—but did it hold the lady, or the tiger? After all, the princess had agonized for days over this moment: she despaired to think of her lover being mauled and killed by the tiger, bleeding and shrieking on the arena floor—but she was also enflamed with jealousy to think that the young man should marry another woman, especially given that the princess knew which lady had been selected for the young man and hated her for having flirted with the young man in the past.

The narrator does not presume to tell us what decision the princess came to; and for a final time puts the question to us: "Which came out of the opened door—the lady, or the tiger?"

CHARACTERS

The king – The "semi-barbaric" tyrant of a kingdom somewhat influenced by distant "Latin" neighbors, the king has grandiose ideals, not least among them that justice should be administered with absolute impartiality, by chance. It is to this end—and also for his own viewing pleasure— that he has established the **public arena** in which the accused are forced to choose between one door, one of which hides a beautiful lady to whom the accused will be married (whether he likes it or not) if he opens her door, and the other a ferocious tiger that will devour him should he open its door. When the king discovers that his daughter, *the princess*, has a lover beneath her royal station, a *young man* who serves in the royal court no less, the king condemns this young man to trial by arena.

The princess – The king's beloved daughter, the princess inherits her father's barbarically grandiose idealism and fiery passion. When her lover, the young man, is condemned to trial by **public arena**, the princess uses gold and willpower to discover which door in the arena holds which fate for him, the tiger or the lady, death or marriage. During his trial, with a slight quick movement of her hand, she directs the young man to the door on the right. So: does it hold the lady or the tiger? On the one hand, the princess is horrified to think of the young man's bloody death at the tiger's tooth and claw; on the other, she is agonizingly jealous at the prospect of her lover marrying another woman—especially the lady selected for the young man, whom the princess hates for having flirted with him in the past. While the narrator of the story invites us to meditate on the princess's dilemma, we never learn definitively what she decides to do.

The young man – One of the king's courtiers and the princess's lover, the young man is condemned to trial by **public arena** for aspiring to love one so far above him. He is "tall, beautiful, fair," one of the beautiful young men of the kingdom whose plight arouses the anxiety and admiration of the audience at his trial. His soul is one with the princess's, and when she directs him to the door on the right side of the arena he doesn't hesitate to stride over and open it: but is he greeted by the lady or the tiger?

The audience – The people of the kingdom who gather at the **public arena** to be entertained and pleased by the trials held there. *The king*'s system of poetic justice is especially popular

with audience members because they are excitedly uncertain as to whether they will witness a grizzly death or a joyous (or hilarious) wedding. When someone dies in the arena, the audience mourns with downcast hearts; when someone is married in the arena, they celebrate spectacularly. The audience is fickle in its sympathies, more interested in entertainment than in justice.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

BARBARISM AND CIVILIZATION

The king in "The Lady or the Tiger" is described as "semi-barbaric," poised halfway, it would seem, between barbarism and civilization. He has grandiose ideas and fancies; he orders that even his most whimsical and unrealistic wishes be realized, and he is burningly, gustily passionate, just like his daughter, the princess. What makes the king *semi*-barbaric and not *wholly* barbaric is that his ideas have been "somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors," presumably the Ancient Romans, whose Coliseum, the story implies, served as the model for the king's own **public arena** of poetic justice "by which," the narrator says, "his barbarism had become semified." The arena civilized the kingdom specifically by hosting "exhibitions of manly and beastly valor, the minds of his subjects were refined and cultured."

However, "The Lady or the Tiger" goes on to question and weaken any firm distinction we might draw between barbarism and civilization. After all, the story reminds us that the Roman Coliseum—that architectural wonder constructed by the great civilization of antiquity—served as a stage for bloody gladiatorial battles and the (alleged) execution of Christians by lion, all to the end of entertaining the public. Aren't such practices just as, if not more, barbaric than the king's in the story? Far from being progressive, the Romans themselves were, at least in some ways, semi-barbaric too. Our ideas of what is barbaric and what is civilized seem to be little more than accidents of historical affiliation—Western culture descended from Roman culture, and therefore Westerners are quick to excuse the practices of the Coliseum from barbarism, whereas similar practices like the king's we denounce as barbaric.

But the story goes a step further than this: perhaps, it suggests, we are all of us no more than semi-barbaric. After all, the narrator repeatedly suggests that what really lies at the root of barbarism are the innate human appetite for pleasure and the capacity for intense passion—it is these characteristics which give rise to the king's exuberant fancies, and these which at last make his daughter's heart unknowable to us, full of "devious mazes of passion". But who among us, the story's readers, doesn't want to be pleased, or is wholly devoid of passion? Like the audience in the story, we mourn bloody spectacle—but do we not also find such spectacle, in our heart of hearts, entertaining too, as the audience does? However, even if our wishes and passions do make us semi-barbaric, the story gives us reason for not wanting the case to be otherwise: it is, after all, the princess's barbarism which makes her love so "exceedingly warm and strong." The story is at last conflicted; although it regards the *social* expression of fiery passion, epitomized by the practices of the arena, to be barbaric and unjust, it also concedes that these same characteristics, *privately* expressed, strengthen human love and, in a sense, make life worth living.

JUSTICE, IMPARTIALITY, AND BIAS

The king's administration of justice rests on a principle not unlike that held by Western civilization, namely, that justice should be blind, impartially administered. However, the king pursues this principle to its logical extreme: in his kingdom, rather than use judges or juries, "the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance"—in the form of a public arena in which the accused must choose between two doors, and depending entirely on luck will end up marrying a beautiful lady or be devoured by a hungry tiger. Luck alone determines punishment or reward. Of course, it is true that chance or luck can't be biased or emotionally manipulated or bribed like human judges can, and in this sense the king's method is absolutely impartial. However, we might argue nonetheless that chance has nothing to do with justice: after all, in the king's **public arena**, a vicious murderer might open the door to a lady, while an innocent person might open the door to a tiger. Even though punishment and reward are *impartially* rendered in these cases, it is safe to say that they are not *justly* rendered.

It would seem, then, that no justice system can be absolutely impartial: for justice to be rendered at all, human beings who are by their very nature susceptible to bias must render it. The story investigates this proposition when the princess finds herself in a position to pass judgment on her lover, the young man, who has been accused of a crime and made to face the trial of the public arena. The Princess, in this case, has found out which door in the arena leads to punishment (the tiger) and which to reward (the lady). Yet just as chance is absolutely impartial, so is the princess absolutely biased and deeply conflicted in her interests. On the one hand, she loves the young man and despairs at the thought of his bloody painful death; on the other hand, the idea that her lover should marry

another woman enrages her with jealousy. Given this, she seems just as incapable of rendering justice as pure chance would be. However, if absolute impartiality, such as that offered by chance in the arena, and passionate love, such as the princess's for the young man, both compromise justice, where is justice to be found in this world at all? The story does not answer this question.

THE DANGER OF TREATING LIFE AS ART

Since the **public arena** doesn't administer justice at all, really, we might wonder why the king instituted it in the first place, and why his subjects in the audience continue to tolerate it. The story suggests that both king and subject do so because they are pleased and entertained by what they witness in the arena, be it "a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding." Both treat what happens in the arena as a work of art, a spectacular drama taut with suspense that evokes pity and terror if the accused opens the door to the tiger, or that evokes relief and laughter and merriment if the accused opens the door to the lady. In this sense, the audience of the trial in the story mirrors us as the story's readers: we are watching a drama unfold that interests us and gives us pleasure, even as we squirm with anxiety wondering what the young man's fate will be.

However, the story goes on to make a dark point: the audience at the arena becomes so pleased and entertained by what they witness that they seem to forget that down below on trial are not actors but real people filled with real dread, in an unjust and potentially deadly situation. When we treat life like art, it becomes all too easy to ignore human suffering and even to become complicit in it. What's worse is that the audience recognizes the injustice of the arena—they mourn for those who die there, "that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate"—yet they never protest or boycott the institution, or intervene to protect their fellow subjects. During the young man's trial, the audience is struck by what a grand figure he is, and thinks collectively, "What a terrible thing for him to be there"—but they'd rather watch him suffer than help to get him out. If chance and passion both compromise the administration of justice, pleasure in drama and spectacle numbs us to injustice.

The ambiguity at the end of the story invites us to reflect on our own feelings about the young man's dire situation—were we energized by the danger and eager for bloodshed or hilarity, or were we troubled by the political implications of what we saw, the lack of justice and its attendant human suffering?

UNCERTAINTY, LOVE, AND TRUST

From one perspective, the **public arena** symbolizes broad aspects of the human condition: we live in a world full of choices, but we are uncertain as to what choices lead to what consequences, just as the young man faces a stark choice between life and death, though which door in the arena holds which is a mystery to him. And, in the arena as in some visions of life, people blunder through their choices randomly for the most part, and the consequences of their choices have little or nothing to do with their just deserts.

However, the young man finds himself in a unique situation: he is in love with the princess, and she loves him. Moreover, she has the unprecedented power to help him navigate with certainty the choices before him, for she knows where the lion is, and where the lady. Her love for the young man motivated the princess to acquire this knowledge—but her love also complicates the decision before her. Can she live with herself if her direction leads the young man to death? And, conversely, can she live with herself if the young man is not part of her life but another woman's? The narrator suggests that all authentically passionate love emerges from a barbaric element in human nature, which perhaps explains why the princess's love for the young man could plausibly lead her to sacrifice him to the tiger.

Indeed, in a cruel double bind, it is precisely because the young man loves the princess and she him that he trusts her—but the princess's love is so strong as to make her, in a sense, untrustworthy. Like the reader at the ambiguous end of the story, the young man is in a position to judge the princess's motives when she motions him to the door on the right, and in his love for her he trusts her completely, opening the door she would have him open. But the question arises: does the young man know the princess well enough to be justified in trusting her? And, more eerily, can anybody ever know another well enough to trust them with certainty? We as readers of the story tend to assume, for example, that the young man would prefer to be married than cruelly ripped to shreds by a tiger—but do we know him well enough to make this assumption? Perhaps he, like the princess, could not live without his love, and would rather the tiger than the lady himself. Uncertainty reigns over all decisions and judgments in the story, and trust is paradoxically both generated and dissolved by love.

INTERPRETATION AND THE INTERPRETER

By the end of the story, the narrator leaves open the question as to whether the princess directs the young man to the lady or the tiger, thereby putting us in a position of judgment: "Did the tiger come out of that door, or the lady?" Many readers take this as an invitation *for us* to decide whether the young man is greeted by the lady or the tiger, but doing so would be just as whimsical and imaginatively tyrannical of us as the king's actions are.

Besides the narrator makes it explicit that this is not the

decision open to us at all: rather, we are to interpret what *the princess* would do, based on our knowledge of her nature and situation. But do we know enough even to consider giving a definitive interpretation as to what the princess would do, and, in the second place, are we impartial enough to judge her fairly? The story seems skeptical on both counts. We presumably do not share the young man's love for the princess, and hence don't trust her absolutely, but we nonetheless bring our own personal experience and attitudes to bear on the princess's decision, even if only subconsciously. Just as the story suggests that people can't know one another with certainty, as is the case with the young man and the princess, so too does it suggest that interpreters can't ever make any interpretive claims with certainty, but are always in a sense interpreting their own wishes, anxieties, and biases instead.

It is perhaps best to follow in the narrator's footsteps at the end of the story and to concede that interpretive claims are presumptuous and that interpretation is best suspended when confronted with unanswerable ambiguities.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PUBLIC ARENA

Though architecturally modeled on the Roman Coliseum, the **public arena** in "The Lady or the Tiger?" has a purpose that emanated from the semi-barbaric king's mind alone: the absolutely impartial administration of justice by means of "incorruptible chance." Those condemned to trial by arena are simply presented with two identical doors: one door conceals a suitable lady whom the condemned will marry whether he likes it or not, while the other door conceals a ferocious tiger that invariably kills the man who releases it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Charles Scribner's Sons edition of *The Lady or the Tiger? and Other Stories* published in 1884.

The Lady or the Tiger? Quotes

In the very olden time there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammeled, as became the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts.

Related Characters: The king

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces us to the world of the short story. The phrase "in the very olden time," like the traditional "once upon a time," lets us know that the story we're about to read is something of a fairy tale or folk tale.

The king's "Latin neighbors" are the Ancient Romans, who lived in a great and powerful civilization. They were progressive in some ways – for example, in the way they organized their society (as a republic before it became an empire) and sense of civic virtue – but Rome was barbaric in many ways as well. They waged brutal wars of conquest, tortured political prisoners in spectacularly awful ways, and entertained the public with gruesome gladiatorial combat in the Coliseum, which is what inspired the king to build his arena. The narrator, then, is being a bit ironic in pointing to "the progressiveness" of Rome, suggesting that notions of barbarism and civilization are, to some extent, relative.

The king himself is "florid," that is, excessively and elaborately flowery in speech and gesture, which the story associates with the strong and somewhat uncontrolled nature of what it calls "barbarism." The King is also described as being godlike in being able to turn "fancies into facts." On one hand, this refers to the king's total power within his kingdom: whatever he wants to happen will happen. At the same time, anotherway of reading this story is as an allegory for God's relationship to the world, in which the king is God and the arena is the world he's created and peopled.

The arena of the king...with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces the key setting of the story, the king's public arena. The arena is modeled on the Roman Coliseum, where gladiators fought and Christians were martyred. The king's arena is "an agent of poetic justice," in that it is seen by the king and his subjects as giving fitting rewards and punishments to those who deserve them.

But the narrator is being ironic in calling the arena an agent of poetic justice, for there is no such thing as justice determined by chance. Chance gives rewards and punishments without regard for what people deserve – which is the very opposite of justice.

The architecture of the arena reminds us how little spectators there really see of what goes on. Sitting in the "encircling galleries," they may think that they have an omniscient view – but they don't. There are "mysterious vaults" and "unseen passages" that conceal important things. The climax of the story turns on just such an unseen passage, to use this phrase metaphorically now, in which we aren't told whether the king's daughter has arranged for her lover to meet with a lady or tiger in the arena.

> The decisions of this tribunal [held in the public arena] were not only fair, they were positively determinate: the accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty, and, if innocent, he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments of the king's arena.

Related Characters: The king

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Trial by arena can result in one of two "decisions": the accused is either eaten by a tiger (in which case the king and his subjects believe that "chance" has determined that the accused was guitly) or rewarded with a marriage (innocent).

This, of course, is not fair at all. To be fair, a justice system must first determine whether or not we're guilty, and only then may it punish or reward us appropriately. But the king's arena punishes or rewards first, only for guilt or innocence to be deduced after the fact. The narrator uses "fair" ironically and with a bit of humor, then, although he's right to say that being eaten or married off is a "positively determinate" outcome – that is, an outcome that settles the matter unambiguously.

One final irony we should point out is that the reward of being married off may very well be a punishment. After all, a man determined to be innocent is rewarded "whether he liked it or not." This casts even further doubt on the fairness of the king's arena.

> The institution was a very popular one. When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding. This element of uncertainty lent an interest to the occasion which it could not otherwise have attained. Thus, the masses were entertained and pleased...

Related Characters: The audience

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The king's subjects love the arena; it is a source of entertainment for them, just as the Coliseum entertained the Romans, and just as sporting events entertain people today. The arena attracts people through the spectacle of "a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding," and also by creating suspense for the audience as to which outcome will come to pass.In their excitement, however, the king's subject seem to forget that the people in the arena are not performers, but real people facing life-changing consequences no matter what happens.

From another perspective, the story implicates us, its readers, in taking pleasure in other people's confusion and pain. We enjoy the suspense of the arena just as much as its fictional audience does. But the narrator doesn't let us enjoy that suspense without complicating it – and he complicates it precisely by not telling us what happens and keeping us always in suspense!

Of course, everybody knew that the deed with which the accused was charged had been done. He had loved the princess, and neither he, she, nor any one else, thought of denying the fact; but the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of the tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and the king would take an aesthetic pleasure in watching the course of events...

Related Characters: The young man, The princess, The king

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The king's daughter, a passionate young princess, passionately loved a young man beneath her station. The king was outraged by this crime, and decreed that the young man should face his trial in the arena.

We might think that a trial is hardly what is called for in this case. Everyone in the kingdom knew about the love affair between the princess and the young man, which neither of them would have even denied. It is absurd to put someone on trial who's already pleaded guilty – but this is precisely what the king does, because he is delighted by the spectacle of the trials themselves and because he can do whatever he wants.

"Aesthetic pleasure" is the pleasure people experience when perceiving something beautiful, like a work of art. The king does not think that justice and"aesthetic pleasure" are incompatible – but they are, because the workings of justice should rarely, if at all, be pleasing in the same way that a play or movie or story is pleasing. The reality of justice is seldom so clean or satisfying as a story. States in which violence is treated as a work of art tend to rely on terror in governing their people.

A door beneath the royal party opened, and the lover of the princess walked into the arena. Tall, beautiful, fair, his appearance was greeted with a low hum of admiration and anxiety. Half the audience had not known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

Related Characters: The princess, The young man, The audience

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

For having a love affair with the princess, the young man is subjected to trial by arena. He is handsome, and the audience immediately sympathizes with him as a result. This suggests that the spectators are rather superficial – they should sympathize with the young man because he's being treated unjustly by the king, not because he's "tall, beautiful, fair."

The audience members seem to understand that the relationship between the princess and the young man is perfectly natural, maybe even to be encouraged. We might feel the same, especially since we're so used to the formula where young lovers are cruelly kept from one another by their tyrannical parents, as in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Despite the audience's "anxiety," though, and despite thinking that it's "terrible" for the young man to be in the arena, the audience are content to watch him suffer. Just as an audience of *Romeo and Juliet* might find pleasure in the deadly "star-crossed" love of the two lover, the audience in the story takes pleasurein the young man's trial as if he is a character in a drama. When such violence is treated as art, the viewer ceases to view the person suffering that violence as a person, and what is awful and unjust becomes just another thing to enjoy.

Had it not been for the moiety of barbarism in her nature it is probable that the lady would not have been there, but her intense and fervid soul would not allow her to be absent on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested.

Related Characters: The princess

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

In attendance at the young man's trial is not only the king but also the princess. She wouldn't have been there if she didn't have "the moiety of barbarism in her nature," that is, if

she weren't half-barbaric like her father ("moiety" is an equal half of something).

The king is "interested" in the young man's trial in the sense that it gives him "aesthetic pleasure." So is the audience, even though they think it "terrible" that the young man should be subjected to the arena. The princess is "terribly interested" in the trial in a much different sense. She cannot witness the young man's trial as a drama, because she is passionately in love with him, and because no matter what happens to him she will be heartbroken. In playing on these two senses of "interested" – the aesthetic and the deeply heartfelt – the narrator emphasizes how inappropriate aesthetic interest is in the case of young man.

> She knew in which of the two rooms, that lay behind those doors, stood the cage of the tiger, with its open front, and in which waited the lady... Gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

Related Characters: The princess

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

As has never happened before in the history of the arena, someone watching the young man's trial knows which door holds the lion and which the lady. This someone is the princess herself.This points to yet another flaw in the arena's justice–the rich and privileged princess can buy certainty in the arena, whereas less privileged people must rely on luck.

Just as the king believes he should get what he wants, the princess believes the same. She believes not in the law or justice, but in her own will and power.

The lengths to which the princess goes to get this information is a testament to the power of her love for the young man. But this leads to a further complication: how will a princess with such a powerful love but also a "barbaric" belief in her own right to get what she wants react to the prospect of her lover marrying another woman if he survives?

> The only hope for the youth in which there was any element of certainty was based upon the success of the princess in discovering this mystery; and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded, as in his soul he knew she would succeed.

Related Characters: The princess, The young man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

During his trial in the arena, the young man looks to the princess for guidance, because in his soul he knew that she'd learn which door in the arena held which fate.

But what "element of certainty" can he possibly expect? We might assume that the young man wants to live and not die, and so the certainty he might desire is that he's opening the door to the lady and not the door to the tiger. But this reading itself is very uncertain. In the first place, the princess's passionate love for the young man makes her decision impossible to guess: does she love the young man enough that he leads him to life, or does she love him enough that she cannot live with the prospect of him marrying another? Furthermore, we can't even be certain that we know what the young man desires. Maybe he couldn't live without the princess either, and would prefer the tiger's jaws to a forced marriage with someone other than her.

> Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady?

The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way.

Related Characters: The princess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator ends the story not with certainty and finality, but with uncertainty and an open question. During the young man's trial in the arena, did the princess direct him to the lady or the tiger?

The narrator anticipates that we might be overeager for

closure. He reminds us that we shouldn't answer this question with the answer we find most pleasing, nor should we answer this question as though we get to decide the young man's fate. For it is the princess, and not us, who has that burdensome privilege. To answer the question, then, we must study "the human heart," specifically the princess's heart. But the more we study her heart, the more we lose ourselves in "devious mazes of passion." The image of the maze recalls the "mysterious vaults" and "unseen passions" that the narrator used to describe the arena itself earlier in the story, as if to remind us that the whole world poses questions to us every day as unanswerable as the one the narrator leaves us with here. Do we ever have enough information to give a definitive answer to questions about human motive and intent and passion?

The narrator doesn't answer his own question, and perhaps we would be wise to leave it unanswered, too, content instead to dwell in the vast, impenetrable mystery of the human heart.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LADY OR THE TIGER?

Long ago, there lived a semi-barbaric king who, though influenced somewhat by the progressiveness of his "distant Latin neighbors" (presumably the Romans), nonetheless had grandiose ideas, an exuberant imagination, and governed his kingdom like a tyrant. He liked it when things went his way, and liked it even more when things didn't, because he took great pleasure in making "the crooked straight."

The king is like a god in his power, but not a benevolent one. He takes great pleasure in making the crooked straight because he enjoys more than anything exerting his will heroically—not only that, but he also enjoys the drama of conflict that he ultimately wins, which anticipates the pleasure he takes in his arena.

One reason the king is considered only "semi-barbaric" and not wholly barbaric is that he adopted from his Latin neighbors the **public arena**. Barbarically, however, the king staged not gladiatorial contests or Christian martyrdoms in his arena, but trials. His arena was "an agent of poetic justice," where vice was punished and virtue rewarded "by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance."

Ironically, the king's Latin neighbors are just as barbaric as he is, evinced by their gladiatorial contests and religious persecution. The narrator is also being ironic in calling the arena an agent of poetic justice, for there is no such thing as justice determined by chance. One might call it "impartial punishment", or "blind punishment," but not justice. The king's "semi" barbarity involves the fact that he has created a system that even he himself cannot alter once it is set in motion; the "barbarity" remains in that the "justice" is no justice at all, but rather an enjoyment of the infliction of arbitrary rules, and possibly pain and death, upon a person.

The **public arena** worked like this: when a subject was accused of a crime that interested the king, an announcement would be issued that on an appointed day that subject's trial would be held in the arena. When the day came, an audience would consequently assemble at the arena, into which would be released the subject on trial. In the arena were two identical doors, one on the right and one on the left; behind one of these was the fiercest tiger that could be found, and behind the other a lady suitable to become the accused's wife. The subject could open whichever door he pleased, unguided save by chance.

The arena is massively entertaining, full of suspense. This is why the king only stages trials that interest him there, and why the people flock to witness the trials he stages. Of course, it is totally unjust: what if someone is placed in the arena whose alleged crime doesn't merit the death penalty? Why should the innocent have the same odds as someone guilty of meeting with a horrible fate?

If the accused opened the door leading to the tiger in the **public arena**, the tiger would invariably kill him, iron bells would sadly toll, hired mourners would wail, and the audience would leave the arena with "downcast hearts," sad "that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate." If the accused opened the door leading to the lady, however, he would be instantly married to her, regardless of whether or not he already had a wife or wanted to marry at all; brass bells would happily ring, the audience would cheer, and the married man would lead his bride home on a path strewed with flowers.

Notice that the respective aftermaths of the accused meeting with either the lady or the tiger are parallel: punishment, bells, and audience response. This emphasizes the ritualistic and theatrical quality of trial by arena, as do the hired mourners. It is, further, ironic and darkly comic that someone could be "rewarded" with marriage who does not want to be married, indeed, who looks on marriage as a punishment.

This **public arena**, then, was "the king's semi-barbaric method of administering justice." It was perfectly fair in that the accused did not know which door held which fate, and in that the accused was instantly punished if he found himself guilty, instantly rewarded if he found himself innocent—also in that the accused had "the whole matter in his own hands." The uncertainty of the accused's fate lent interest to his trial—would the audience see "a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding"? This made the institution of the public arena very popular, both entertaining and pleasing.

Ideally, one's innocence or guilt determines one's consequences in a court of law; but in an ironic twist, in the arena it is the consequences of one's actions that are retroactively taken to determine whether or not one deserved those consequences (if you picked the tiger by chance, then you were guilty). The audience is excited by uncertainty because it creates feelings of suspense—but in their excitement they forget that someone's life is in the balance. The spectacle outweighs the humanity.

Now, the king had a daughter, the princess, as fanciful and passionate as her father. She had fallen in love with a young man, one of the king's courtiers, and her inherited barbarism only made her love "exceedingly warm and strong." Their love affair was happy for months—until the king discovered it. The young man was imprisoned for daring to love the princess; his trial was to be held in the **public arena**. Everyone, from the king to his subjects, was especially interested in this case, because none like it had ever occurred before.

Although the barbaric element of passion in human nature gives rise to absurdities like the public arena, it also makes our love all the more strong, the story suggests—so perhaps passion is not in and of itself bad. Indeed, it is only when we have license to act however we want to under the influence of passion, as the king does, that problems arise. The king and his subjects anticipate this unusual trial because it is all the more dramatic, being unusual.

The **public arena** was stocked with the most savage tiger and the most beautiful woman suitable to the young man as determined "by competent judges." Everyone knew the young man had indeed loved the princess, and not even he or the princess denied the fact, but the king would not allow this to interfere with the workings of his justice system. Either way the king would be happy, because the young man "would be disposed of," and he himself would "take an aesthetic pleasure" in watching the trial unfold.

The competent judges of the lady for the arena are ironically superfluous: the young man has already judged the princess to be the woman for him. The king's justice system is especially absurd in that it is totally unconcerned with evidence—even when that evidence supports his case! Aesthetic pleasure is a pleasure taken in the perception of beauty—the king witnesses trials as one would contemplate a work of art.

The day of the trial arrived. A huge audience gathered to watch. The young man was released into **the public arena**, to the admiration and anxiety of the audience—they thought him a grand youth, and thought it terrible for him to be in the arena. The young man, as was customary, bowed to the king, but was looking all the while at the princess. She would not have been present at the trial were she less passionate and not "so terribly interested" in it, thinking of nothing else for days and nights on end.

Even though the audience recognizes how grand the youth is, they are so committed to the entertainment value of his trial that they do not rise to his defense. While the king has an aesthetic interest in the trial, the princess has a different kind of interest: she is passionately invested in the young man, but is also conflicted about which of his two possible fates she prefers.

So interested, in fact, was the princess, that – as no one before her ever had, not even the king – she had used gold and willpower to learn which door in the **public arena** held which fate. Not only did the princess know which door held which fate, but she also knew who the lady was whom the young man might marry, "one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court." And the princess hated this lady, having seen her, or having imagined that she had seen her, admiring the young man and talking with him.

The princess's ability to learn the secret of which fate lies behind which door demonstrates further how unjust the king's arena is: only a rich princess can buy certainty in the arena, whereas less privileged people must rely on luck. Yet it also suggests that people themselves are similarly unjust. After all, that the princess hates the lady deemed suitable for marriage to the young man makes her all the more biased and all the less trustworthy in terms of her ultimate decision about whether to save or doom him. This in turn casts some doubt on the idea of justice in general. The arena certainly doesn't deliver justice, but it is impartial. The princess's situation puts her in a position to deliver actual justice and save an innocent man, but it is almost impossible for her to be impartial. And if you follow this logic, it is in fact difficult for anyone *to be completely impartial, even in a less difficult situation than that in which the Princess finds herself. So what, then, is the possibility for justice anywhere? And is there, perhaps, a semi-barbarian in all of us?*

From the floor of the **public arena**, the young man looked into the princess's eyes and knew at once—for so it is with lovers whose souls are one—that the princess knew which door held which fate. The young man had expected as much; his only hope was that the princess would succeed in discovering this information, and he knew in his soul that she would succeed, and she had. With a glance he asked the princess which door to open, and in a flash, unseen by anyone save the young man, the princess raised her right hand "and made a slight quick movement toward the right." The young man rapidly walked to the door on the right and opened it.

Because he loves her, the young man trusts the princess absolutely; but does he know her well enough to really trust her? For that matter, do we know the young man well enough to say which fate he would prefer, lady or tiger, or which would be better for him? Perhaps gallantly doing as the princess bids him is his heart's sole desire, and not survival. However, both the princess's and the young man's hearts remain shrouded in mystery; we do not know enough about them to pass judgment or have a real idea of what they will do.

But did the tiger came out, or the lady? The more we reflect on this question, the narrator says, the harder it is to answer. "It involves a study of the human heart which leads us through devious mazes of passion." The question is not whether *we* would have the young man be punished or rewarded, but what we think the princess would decide to do. How often during her long "days and nights of anguished deliberation" had she seen with horror the tiger kill her lover—but how much oftener yet had she seen her lover marry another woman, which kindled furious jealousy in the princess's heart!

The princess is torn between despair at her lover's death and jealousy at his possible marriage to another woman; the narrator invites us to interpret how she decides her lover's fate in the light of this dilemma. But the princess's heart truly is a maze, and we know so little about the princess that any definitive interpretation of her decision would probably reflect more on us than on the princess herself.

The narrator announces, "it is not for me to presume to set myself up as the one person able to answer" whether the princess sent her lover to death or marriage, either one agonizing for her. So we are left with the question: "Which came out of the opened door—the lady, or the tiger?"

The narrator does not presume to know the princess's heart, and perhaps, the story suggests by extension, we would be wise to do likewise, especially when confronted with an impenetrable ambiguity as we are here.

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